

U.S. DISABILITY RIGHTS LAW: ACCESS TO HEALTH CARE

In the United States, persons with disabilities have the right to access health care and services on an equal basis with others.

Accessible patient rooms: Hospitals and other residential health care facilities should ensure that some of their patient rooms are fully accessible to persons with disabilities. Accessible features may include adjustable height beds, accessible toilet rooms, visual alarms, TTY and volume control phones, and closed captioned televisions. When not operating at full capacity, accessible rooms should be reserved for persons with disabilities.

Medical equipment: Facilities should ensure that examination rooms contain at least one adjustable height examination table that enables individuals who use wheelchairs to more easily and safely transfer to the examination equipment. Other accessible medical equipment may include accessible chairs, mechanical lifts, transfer boards, accessible radiologic equipment, and wheelchair scales.

Barrier removal: Facilities should survey their buildings and facilities to determine where structural barriers may exist, and remove them. Public phone banks should include TTY phones and/or signage indicating where TTY phones may be found.

Effective communication policies: Healthcare providers should ensure that they are providing effective communication for individuals who are deaf, hard-of-hearing, blind, have low vision, or have speech impairments, which includes ensuring that patients are provided appropriate auxiliary aids and services, such as qualified sign language and oral interpreters. Facilities should also provide a means of accessible phone communication (TTY) for persons who need them.

Training: Healthcare providers should ensure that all staff involved in direct patient assistance – such as doctors, nurses, aides, receptionists, orderlies, and admissions staff – receive proper training on providing equal access for patients with disabilities. Such training should address topics such as conducting individualized patient assessments to determine whether patients will require any unique assistance, communicating with persons with cognitive impairments, proper operation of transfer equipment, and proper lifting and transferring techniques.

Service animals: Healthcare providers should adopt policies that allow persons accompanied by service animals to go anywhere in the healthcare facility except for those limited areas where special infection control procedures are necessary, such as surgical suites.

Accessible transportation: Facilities should ensure that ambulances and hospital shuttle buses are accessible to persons with disabilities and do not deny services to any persons with disabilities, including those with HIV disease.

Consultation with the community: Facilities should consult with persons with disabilities and other accessibility experts in the development of policies, training, barrier removal, and the acquisition of accessible equipment.

Complaint process: Facilities should appoint an individual or office to be responsible for ensuring that medical services are accessible to persons with disabilities, and provide a process by which the facility will resolve complaints in a timely manner.

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For more information, visit the U.S. Department of Justice's ADA Home Page at www.ada.gov.